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U.S. BACKING RAIDS AGAINST NICARAGUA

But Officials Insist Their Scope
Is Limited and Not Aimed
at Toppling Sandinists

By PHILIP TAUBMAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Nov. 1 — The United States is supporting small-scale clandestine military operations against Nicaragua intended to harass but not to overthrow the Nicaraguan Government, senior Reagan Administration officials said today.

The officials denied a report in Newsweek magazine that the Central Intelligence Agency was trying by covert means to topple the leftist Government in Managua.

A senior national security official insisted that the scope of clandestine operations was limited to hit-and-run raids into Nicaragua by small paramilitary units based in Honduras, skirmishes with Nicaraguan troops along the Honduran border, and financial support for political opponents of the Sandinist Government.

The official said that no Americans were directly involved in the paramilitary operations, but acknowledged that the C.I.A. was providing money and military equipment to the units. He added that Americans were also helping to train the anti-Sandinist forces, which are made up primarily of Nicaraguan refugees.

Within Limits of Plan

The official contended that the military and financial aid fell within the limits of an overall plan for covert operations in Central America approved by President Reagan almost a year ago.

The plan, parts of which were disclosed in press accounts earlier this year, called for formation of a small paramilitary unit in Honduras to inter-

dict Cuban supply lines, neighboring El Salvador and financial support for moderate political and business institutions and leaders in Nicaragua, according to Administration officials.

"We are not waging a secret war, or anything approaching that," a senior intelligence official said. "What we are doing is trying to keep Managua off balance and apply pressure to stop providing military aid to the insurgents in El Salvador."

Administration officials reacted strongly to assertions in Newsweek that the covert operations were "out of control" and that an expansion of the activities had been "improvised" by the American Ambassador in Honduras, John D. Negroponte.

Cleared With Washington

"Negroponte, as the chief of mission, oversees the operations, but nothing is done without clearing it in Washington first," a senior intelligence official said.

Some Administration officials have advocated a more ambitious effort against the Sandinist Government, which seized power in 1979 after overthrowing the Government of Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

But Mr. Reagan and other top officials reportedly rejected the use of greater force partly because they considered it potentially counterproductive to overall American policy, and partly because intelligence officials said that the C.I.A. did not have adequate resources to undertake a major paramilitary operation.

The result, some Administration officials said, was a limited covert operation, designed to sting but not incapacitate the Sandinists.

According to national security officials, the clandestine military activities were to have been supervised primarily by Argentina, which had organized anti-Sandinist paramilitary forces in Honduras 18 months ago, before the American involvement.

Initially, Argentina did take the lead in supplying and directing the units, which number 2,000 to 4,000 men, dispersed in several camps along the Honduras-Nicaragua border, according to American officials. But Argentine assistance waned after disputes developed between American and Argentine advisers and after the United States supported Britain in its war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands, Administration officials said.